Abusers: Husbands, Boyfriends and Former Sexual Partners

Bruna S Nascimento, Department of Psychology,
University of Bath

Definition

Abusers are those individuals who use strategies of intimidation, threat, isolation, physical and sexual aggression against a victim. There are different forms of abuse that can be broadly categorised into physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. When the victims are women, the abuser is often someone close to the victim, especially male partners and male ex-partners.

Introduction

Aggression in the context of a relationship, also called intimate partner violence (IPV), has been documented across several cultures (see Archer, 2006), having detrimental impacts on the victims' health, such as physical injuries, poorer cognitive functioning, and psychological problems (Lawrence, Orengo-Aguayo, Langer, & Brock, 2012) and on the relationship, predicting relationship dissatisfaction (Hammet, Lavner, Karney, Bradbury, 2017). While Archer (2000) found in a meta-analysis that among young American couples, women are slightly more likely to use physical aggression than men, men are more likely to cause an injury in their partners, such that women represent 62% of injured partners. In the United States (US), 33% of female murder victims are killed by their partners against 3% of male murder (Fox & Zawitz, 2007). In fact, data collected worldwide demonstrated that 30% of women reported to have experienced intimate partner violence at some point in their lives, while 38.6% of female murders are committed by intimate partners (Devries, Mak, & García-Moreno, 2013). Such statistics demonstrate that women's current or former partners are often their abusers, and despite

much research looking for potential explanations from different perspectives, predicting and preventing intimate partner violence remains a challenge.

Ultimate explanations of male aggression against women have traditionally highlighted social and cultural aspects as the driving factors behind this phenomenon. For example, a feminist perspective emphasises the role of a patriarchal system, marked by male dominance, in male abuse against women (Johnson, 2011). More comprehensive approaches have considered a combination of several factors such as individual, interpersonal and family factors, neighborhood and community, and policy, systems, and society (Beyer, Wallis, & Hamberger, 2015). In this entry, however, I will consider an evolutionary perspective, exploring the idea that male intimate partner aggression has evolved because it served survival goals, therefore reflecting male reproductive striving. Before discussing why men are particularly aggressive towards their partner or former partners, I will first discuss why men have a tendency to be more physically aggressive than women. For the purposes of this entry, the terms partner aggression and partner abuse will be used to describe any episode of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse practiced by a current or former partner.

Main body

Human aggression: why are men more physically aggressive than women?

In our evolutionary past, when resources that were necessary for survival, such as food, shelter, and mates, were in short supply in the environment, to secure such resources, individuals needed to engage in competition with others, which usually required physical aggression. Whilst the winner of the contest would take home the prize, the loser would end up seriously wounded or dead (Campbell, 2015). Although both men and women need resources, and therefore both would benefit from competition, the costs associated

with engaging in competition vary across sexes. Overall, while men are more prone to engage in contests, women are generally more cautious and avoid physically aggressive competition.

To understand the nature of these differences, we need to take a closer look at the roles of men and women in reproduction. While men's direct contribution to reproduction is limited to copulation, women carry a disproportionate reproductive burden (Fathalla, 2015). Women are responsible for the intrauterine care of fetuses and embryos during a 9-month pregnancy, which is among primates the longest duration of gestation. On top of this, women are also responsible for postnatal parental care, particularly breastfeeding that may last several years. Whilst men increase their reproductive success by dominating other male competitors to secure access to females for copulation and other resources, women do best by avoiding direct conflict and staying alive to protect their offspring (Campbell, 2015). This helps to explain why, overall, men are usually more aggressive and more willing to take risks than women are. This also offers an idea of how women became more vulnerable to partner aggression, but it is not the whole picture. Furthermore, this does not explain why men can be particularly aggressive towards their own partners.

How did women become more vulnerable to partner aggression?

One of the main assumptions of Trivers' (1972) parental investment theory is that the sex that invests more heavily in reproduction will be more selective in choosing a partner. This means that men would benefit from mating with basically any fertile women, whereas women would be more selective and pick a mate with the best possible genes, or a mate that is willing to provide women with resources such as protection and parental care (Puts, 2015; Trivers, 1972). As such, women become a valuable limiting resource for men because men's opportunities to reproduce are constrained by women's

willingness to mate with them (Daly & Wilson, 1989). This creates a clear conflict of interest and if there were no consequences, the use of physical force would allow men to secure access to as many partners as possible and as a result, give them higher chances to reproduce and pass on their genes, as it happens among other primates (Baniel, Cowlishaw, & Huchard, 2019). Although sexual coercion among humans is not rare (Jeffrey & Barata, 2017), explaining men's aggression against their female partner is not that straightforward and others factors also need to be considered.

From an evolutionary perspective, Smuts (1992) argues that male aggression against women may have become relevant in the context of exclusive mating relationships, reflecting men's reproductive striving. Long-term committed relationships are the preferred human mating strategy that evolved to ensure people's reproductive success (Miller & Maner, 2010) by solving adaptive problems such as investment in offspring, acquiring resources, and maintaining female fecundity (Conroy-Beam, Goetz, & Buss, 2015). Sex specific benefits for women would include greater access to resources and gaining protection, whereas for men the main benefits would be increasing probability of paternity and access to better mates (Buss, 2003). Smuts (1992) hypothesises that, in our evolutionary past, women became more vulnerable to aggression from their own partners because other men would be less likely to interfere and risk jeopardising male-male alliances. Although this explanation is only speculative, it helps to understand how women may have become more vulnerable to intimate partner aggression; however, it does not explain what motivates men to hurt their own partners.

Why do men hurt women they "love"?

Although exclusive romantic relationships have provided several benefits for both sexes and solved adaptive problems, such arrangements also have created extra adaptive problems. Once a high-fitness partner has been secured, individuals face potential threats,

such as the threat of mate poachers, to the relationship that may lead to infidelity or to relationship dissolution, which would imply in the loss of all the benefits brought about by an exclusive relationship (Conroy-Beam et al., 2015). Infidelity represents a great threat to relationships, representing one of the main reasons for divorce (Fincham & May, 2016). Whilst it may be disturbing for both sexes, men find it particularly costly, because infidelity may result in investment of men's resources in other men's offspring, and damage to their reputation (Shackelford, Pound, Goetz, & Lamunyon, 2015). In fact, men's jealousy over women's infidelity is one of the main driving forces behind lethal and non-lethal male aggression against their partners (Stieglitz, Gurven, Kaplan, & Winking, 2012). This is consistent with the hypothesis that romantic jealousy is an evolved adaptation designed to preserve a relationship, avoid infidelity by the partner and therefore, retain access to the partner's relevant resources (Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982). Cues of a partner's infidelity activate jealousy emotions that, in turn, will put in motion strategies to deal with such a threat (Bendixen, Kennair, & Buss, 2015).

Strategies designed to solve the adaptive problem of partner potential infidelity and prevent relationship dissolution are regarded as mate retention strategies (Buss, 1988). Buss (1988) identified several mate retention tactics directed either to the partner (intersexual tactics), which is our focus in this chapter, or to a potential rival (intrasexual tactics). Tactics directed to the partner can be both positive, which means that they operate by providing benefits to the partners such as love and care, and negative, in which case they operate by inflicting costs on the mate. The cost-inflicting tactics within the set of intersexual strategies are: (1) *Direct guarding*, involving vigilance, concealment of mate, and monopolisation of mate's time; (2) *Negative Inducements* that describe behaviours such as infidelity threat, punishment of mate threat to commit infidelity and emotional manipulation; and (3) *Public Signs of Possession* that reflect verbal and physical

possession signals. Such behaviours reflect one's attempts to restrict and regulate partner's sexual autonomy and are hypothesised to be an adaptive solution for the problem of intrasexual competition for mates because ancestral men who used such strategies were more reproductively successful since they were better at avoiding threats from rivals and at preventing partner's infidelity.

Such categories described different forms of controlling women sexuality by using force or its threat to increase the chances that a female will mate with the aggressor or to decrease the chances that a female will mate with a rival. Therefore, male abuse against their female partners is an attempt at deterring the partner from engaging in infidelity, which could result in paternity uncertainty and mistakenly allocating resources to a rival's offspring. In fact, Shackelford et al. (2005) across several studies demonstrated that male mate retention tactics, particularly direct guarding and negative inducements predicts male aggression and abuse in general, providing further evidence for the hypothesis that male aggression towards their female partners reflects a male reproductive strategy.

In some extreme cases, abuse may take the form of rape. Evolutionary psychologists have hypothesised that men sexually violate their partners in circumstances of increased risk of sperm competition, which is the competition of a different male's sperm to fertilise a female's egg (McKibbin, Pham, & Shackelford, 2013). This would happen particularly when a man suspects or finds out that his partner has been sexually unfaithful, in which case she risks being impregnated by a rival. In such cases men may force themselves on their partners to engage in sperm competition and avoid investing in offspring that is not their own. A study testing this hypothesis directly demonstrated that men who suspected of a partner's infidelity were more likely to perform sexually coercive behaviours, such as rape (Goetz & Shackelford, 2006). This supports the hypothesis that

men have evolved psychological mechanisms that will motivate them to commit partner rape in the prospect of sperm competition as a response to partner infidelity.

Despite, or as a consequence of, a male's efforts to retain a mate, the partner may end the relationship, which may also motivate male aggression against women. Partner defection causes not only the loss of their resources but can also negatively affect the formation of new relationships. For example, it has been documented that the discovery that someone was rejected by their former partner negatively affects people's desire for dating them (Stanik, Kurzban, & Ellsworth, 2010). As such, because relationship dissolution results both in the loss of the former partner's resources and problems to have access to a new partner, the rejected man may make use of a series of strategies either to prevent the partner from dating again or to regain access to the partner or both. Over the course of our evolutionary history, women have suffered with male abuse because of sexual rejection. Strategies may include threats, stalking, and violence, which may reflect a desperate tactic and last attempt to reacquire the partner, reflecting a mate retention strategy (Duntley & Buss, 2014).

Is there a typical abuser profile?

Male aggression against women in general functions as a controlling tool over women's behaviours because of the high costs to women of physical injury inflicted by men. However, most men do not abuse their partners or make use of extreme measures of coercion such as physical aggression. This suggests that, on a proximal level, there are variables that influence the usage and/or intensity of male partner abuse, such as the own attributes of the abuser. Studies have focused particularly in identifying any common characteristics in abusers to elaborate a male abuse profile. However, despite some typologies available in the literature (e.g. Holzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994), studies have failed to provide systematic evidence regarding the psychological characteristics of

abusers (Dobash & Dobash, 2009). Recent research profiling male abusers comparing generally extra-family violent men and generalist batterers showed that these two groups do not significantly differ in their individual, family and community characteristics, suggesting that aggression towards a partner share a common ethology with general aggression (Juarros-Basterretxea, Herrero, Fernández-Suárez, Pérez, & Rodríguez-Díaz, 2018). Gondolf (2002) compared intimate partner abusers to men from the general population, but did not found substantial differences regarding psychological problems, although a small proportion of men in the first group are described as having serious psychological problems. As pointed out by Dobash and Dobash (2009), such mixed evidence suggests that male abusers are not actually mentally disturbed, but that they are just ordinary men, which makes it harder to predict and prevent such problems.

However, despite the apparent absence of an abuser's typical profile, men's attributes seem to influence the usage and intensity of aggression towards their partners as studies have shown differences between abusers and non-abusers. Such differences appear to confirm the evolutionary view of male aggression as an instrument of male domination over women. For example, partner male abusers, in comparison to non-abusers, report lower self-esteem, which is associated with jealousy, greater justification of male dominance and of use of aggression for conflict resolution (Diaz-Aguado & Martinez, 2015). Men's possessiveness, jealousy, and sense of entitlement are also characteristics that contribute to partner abuse, particularly to extreme cases that end in murder (Daly & Wilson, 1998). Analysing those men who make use of extreme forms of violence, neuropsychological studies analysing male batterers have demonstrated that this group presents low performance of tests on executive functioning, verbal skills, and vocabulary (Bueso-Izquierdo, Hart, Hidalgo-Ruzzante, Kropp, & Pérez-García, 2015), suggesting that these men may use violence as their form of communication in the

relationship. On top of that, male batterers also have thinner brain areas related to emotion processing such as, prefrontal and limbic brain areas, in comparison to other criminals, suggesting that they have poorer emotion regulation (Verdejo-Roman, Bueso-Izquierdo, Daugherty, Perez-Garcia, & Hidalgo-Ruzzante, 2017). Such characteristics seem to describe a dominant and possessive male profile that find violence as a way of solving conflicts, particularly in the context of a relationships. This is consistent with the evolutionary hypotheses describing men's abusive behaviours as a way of retaining a partner and ultimately enhancing their reproductive success.

Conclusion

The evolutionary theory can tell us a lot about why men are usually more physically aggressive than women are, and why they quite often direct their aggressive behaviour towards their partner. In this entry, I have reviewed some evidence in this entry supporting the evolutionary view that male aggression towards their partners may be a reproductive strategy. Essentially, physical, psychological, or sexual abuse performed by men in the context of a romantic relationship are extreme, and sometimes desperate, strategies to prevent their partners from engaging in infidelity or ending the relationship. I demonstrated this by reviewing current literature on male mate retention strategy and jealousy, demonstrating that abusive men are more jealous and possessive. In turn, jealousy predicts the usage of mate retention tactics that reflect men's efforts to retain a valuable partner and consequently ensure access to the partner's resources. Such strategies may include different types of abuse, going as far as physical aggression. Therefore, the different forms of abuse perpetrated by men against their partners are part of male reproductive strategies, reflecting men's attempt at dominating women. I discussed how male partner abusers tend to be more jealous, justify male dominance, and

have poorer emotion regulation, which contributes to the usage of more extreme forms of abuse, such as physical aggression.

It is important to consider here, however, as argued by Smuts (1992) that adopting an evolutionary view of spouse abuse is not an attempt to justify intimate partner aggression or to explain the relations between sexes using deterministic assumptions. The aim of this entry was simply to discuss the idea that male partner abuse happens because men found aggression to be a powerful tool to dominate women and enhance their reproductive success. This does not mean, however, that men are inherently aggressive, and women are inherently submissive. Male partner abuse is not inevitable, and as discussed earlier in this chapter, most men do not use measures of control over their partners, but that there are certain male attributes and circumstances that may trigger such behaviours. Additionally, despite the temporary "advantages" that the use of aggression apparently brings for men, there are a number of costs that not rarely outweigh its benefits.

Cross-References

Aggression for Sexual Access; Context's for Men's Aggression Against Women; Intimate Partner Violence; Violence to Control Women's Sexuality

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